# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ASA-KO HIROOKA

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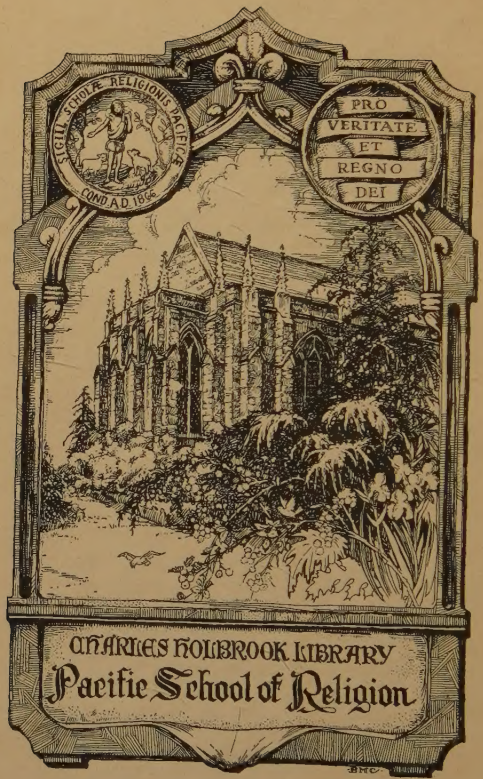


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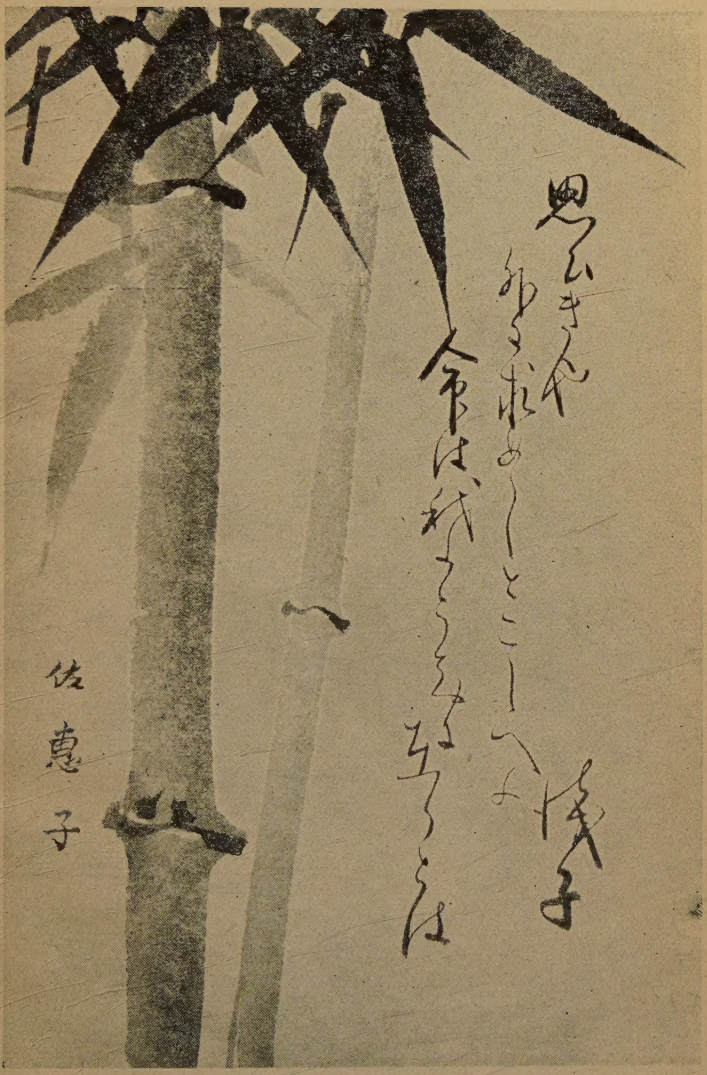

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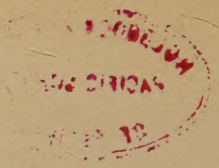
Little I thought,
As far afield Eternal Life I sought,
That here within
The goal elusive evermore had been !

W. M. V.

Translation of Poem
by Asa-ko Hirooka.



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# PREFACE.

This booklet is the life-sketch of a wonderful woman. It is a most interesting human document, which, in a perfectly frank and natural manner, lays bare the soul of a great personality. Madam Hirooka was honest, sincere, and zealous in every thing she did. She was a Japanese "Puritan" in the literal meaning of that term, and she possessed and displayed the good qualities of real Puritans.

She was an interesting character also because, like the late Empress of Japan, she was a link between Old and New Japan, between the medieval, feudal organization and the modern, progressive civilization. She lived in two ages and was typical of both; she lived out of the past, in the present, into the future. Born in one wealthy family and married into another wealthy family, she might have lived a quiet

life of ease and comfort; but she preferred the life of business activity. In this respect also she resembled the late Empress, who, instead of living an idle life at court, devoted herself to active work for the women of her own country.

The original of this booklet was only the introduction to a larger work, called "Weekly Epistles," which comprised a series of articles contributed in 1918 to the columns of the *Fukuin Shimpo*, a Christian weekly of Tokio. As those articles were written for Japanese Christian workers, they are not of special interest to foreigners. But the autobiographical sketch of this "twice-born" woman is of such absorbing interest and incalculable value, that Mr. and Mrs. Keizo Hirooka have had it translated into English and published in this form as a Memorial of their mother. And the translation has been well done by their sister, (Mrs.) Maki Hitotsuyanagi Vories.

Madam Hirooka was most widely known by the strong, active elements of her character. But those who knew her intimately were im-

pressed by the elements of modesty and sweetness. Her hands, strong enough to do manual labor (if necessary), were also capable of a dainty handling of delicate objects. She had not only the "golden touch" that created wealth but also the esthetic and poetical instinct. Her poems were recognized by competent critics to be of a high order.* The inflexible bamboo, which is a symbol of uprightness, was her favorite in art and literature. The view of Mount Fuji from her villa in Gotemba was a great inspiration to her. And, in writing for the press, she used a significant nom-de-plume, *Kyu Ten Jik Ki*, which means literally, "Nine Falls, Ten Rises" and typifies the final success in the struggle against evil.

And though, or because, she was such a "strong" character, she did not escape temptation, even after she had given up her life to the service of Christ. She often lamented the fact that her business instincts would seek to obtrude

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* One of these, as translated by Mr. Vories, appears in this volume, together with an original memorial poem by Mr. V.

themselves into her religious work. Wherever she went, on evangelistic tours, her trained eyes were quick to detect the possibilities from a materialistic industrial or commercial point of view. But that was suppressed and never allowed to interfere with her presentation of Gospel truths. She was naturally a popular (and powerful) speaker, at all Christian services, especially in the great national campaign, and never failed to fill even theaters, in which meetings were often held. And she was able to hold large audiences, who were greatly interested in the Mitsui daughter and Hirooka wife and mother who had become such an earnest Christian.

ERNEST W. CLEMENT.

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# AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

# "TO THE SEVENTIETH YEAR."

## CHILDHOOD.

Seventy years ago, I was born in the house of one of the Mitsui families. Women, in those days, were brought up according to Confucian teaching, to obey parents when young, to obey husband when married, and to obey children when old. Learning in books was not considered as important for women as training in domestic service. So I was taught sewing, ceremonial tea, flower arrangement, and music, just to be prepared for marriage, which had already been arranged for me. When I was but two years old, long before I could manage baby talk, I was betrothed to a baby son of the Hirooka family of Osaka. This betrothal was made between two families already related, as it was deemed good luck to have a double tie.

At the time of the great political upheaval (1865) that followed the three hundred years of peace under the Tokugawa rule,* many feudal lords came to Kyoto, where the Imperial throne then was. A number of households doubled up in order to make room for the guests of the city. One or two of our relations came to live with us, bringing in some of my boy cousins.

The world outside was unsettled, but my brother and my cousins did not give up their peaceful pursuit of learning. Watching them at their studies, I felt disgraced to be excluded. So I listened to their reading and privately developed a great interest in learning. My family were very much disturbed about this, that I, a girl, should wish to study like the boys, and they forbade me to read any book. But the stronger the repression the keener was my desire to study, for I thought women too are human beings and have the ability to learn. As I grew older, I began to resent the marriage custom by

* From 1603 to 1868.

which women are passed from one hand to another in matrimony, as though they were so many inanimate objects.

## MARRIAGE.

With a new sense of self-respect, as the modern expression may term it, there was much to think about in the three years which followed. I was seventeen. According to the agreement made in my baby days, I was married into the Hirooka family. Here again I faced the pitiful fate of a woman whose destiny is determined by another will.

Upon marriage, I found that my husband did nothing about his business, leaving all to his manager, and daily indulging in music and tea. Seeing this, I feared for the future of his business and household, and realized that, in case of emergency, I should have to take up the responsibility. So I began to equip myself with a knowledge of book-keeping and arithmetic, and to read books on commercial topics, taking time out of my sleeping hours.

## ACTIVITY IN BUSINESS WORLD.

When I was thirty years old (1868), the Civil War was brought to an end, and the Meiji Era began. With the great upheaval, a panic threatened the merchants of Osaka. This, I thought, was the time for which I had been preparing, and I threw myself into business, taking the responsibility of the family upon my shoulders. In a coal mine in Kyushu with the rough miners, and behind the counter in our bank in Osaka with the shrewd bank clerks, I ran back and forth, allowing myself no time "to warm my chair." The new social order in Japan then was in its infancy; to see a woman active in the business world was shocking enough, but to see her undertake the mining business then almost unknown in Japan, into which even few men ventured, caused people to think me insane.

To look back on those days, it now seems like climbing a precipice. What a narrow escape it was! I suppose I risked many dangers, but through it all, there was not a time when I

stepped out of the path of rectitude. This I believe was God's special providence.

Through those busy days in the business world, my mind was never at rest, deploring the subject state of my own sex in Japan. I felt that the first thing to do to save women from such conditions was to help them in their intellectual development.

## FIRST TO HELP ESTABLISH THE WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY.

I was about forty-five or forty-six when, through a friend's introduction, Mr. Naruse came to me to explain the necessity of an institution for the higher education of women. This seemed as though it were the light to show me how to save the Japanese women from their pitiful condition—a longing which had never left my mind since I was a little girl. So although I was very busy with my work and lacking much in ability, I felt "where there is a will there is a way," and I thought I might do even a little to help if I had the will, so I agreed to

put my name down with those who had taken up the responsibility for the establishment of a Women's University.

At that time my own business was not completely stabilized. It was in such a condition that my anxiety over it kept me awake at night. And the university for which I agreed to lend my hand was itself a pioneer work and many obstacles were in its way. We strove for seven long years. But at last Mr. Naruse's earnest efforts moved the heavens. In April of the thirty-fourth year of Meiji (1901), we had the joy of opening the first Women's University in Japan.

Three years later, my husband died, and I gave up the household with all its responsibilities to my heir; and became a woman of leisure.

I now decided to give myself entirely to work for women. I spent years in helping the Women's University of Tokyo and also the Osaka Branch of the Women's Patriotic Society. When I was in Tokyo, I went to the Women's University and attended Mr. Naruse's lectures

on practical ethics with the young students, and realizing the need of knowledge of science for my mental improvement, I studied with Dr. Nagai and two or three other teachers. I also read a number of books on self-culture.

### BEGINNING OF SPIRITUAL LIFE.

When I reached the age of *Kwanreki*,* I experienced an event that caused a great change in my spiritual life. For thirty years I had had a growth in my breast. It increased until it became about as large as two fists. This growth showed symptoms of becoming malignant, and after examinations by a number of the best physicians and surgeons of the country, it was decided that an operation was necessary. On January twenty-second in the forty-second year of Meiji (1909), I entered the hospital of the Imperial University to be operated upon by Dr. Kondo, the next day. Medical science in Japan

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* *Kwanreki* means return of the calendar. When one reaches the age of sixty the calendar begins a new cycle, and, in Japan, it is customary to celebrate the event with presents of red clothing such as are given to new-born babes.

is very far advanced, especially surgery. The doctor felt the heavy responsibility, but to ease my mind he told me that such an operation was less dangerous than a journey in a train. However, I knew that only one out of a thousand of such operations had been successful, and I also realized that I was old, having passed my sixtieth year, and that even if the operation was successful, there was a doubt of complete recovery afterward. So to be prepared for any thing that might happen, I made my will concerning the affairs in and out of my household and dealt with all the problems I could think of. I then felt I could die cheerfully. The night before the operation I had a very pleasant conversation with the people about me, and had a good sleep. I woke up early the next morning and prepared myself for the operation. I walked into the operating room and conversed with the doctor as I laid myself upon the operating table. Eight grams of ether were sufficient to make me completely unconscious. They had the usual amount of twenty-five grams

ready for me, and it surprised the doctor that so little was needed. As I was becoming unconscious under the influence of the ether, the cloud in my mind was swept away and it was all clear. I felt a great strength and safety. It was the most delightful experience that I had had. The operation was completed in thirty minutes and I was taken back to my room. After a while I began to hear voices. It was like being called back to the human world, and I awoke. Then I felt that Heaven had lent me life again saying, "Do something," and I felt the greatness of the responsibility rather than the joy of it. Since then I have tried to feel again that great strength and that wonderful moment of complete trust in Heaven. I thought that this might be the power which people call God.

### STUDY WITH A CHRISTIAN MINISTER.

At the end of that year, I decided to study Christianity with Mr. Miyagawa, the pastor of the Osaka Church. One day on some business matter I was invited to the house of Mr.

Kikuchi, Mayor of Osaka, with Mr. Naruse and Mr. Miyagawa. I fell into an argument with Mr. Naruse there upon a question of women's education, and Mr. Naruse turned to Mr. Miyagawa saying, "Won't you educate this old lady, we cannot do anything with her." And that was the way I became acquainted with Mr. Miyagawa. A few days later Mr. Miyagawa called on me at my house. He asked me what books I was interested in, and I showed him the books on philosophy and sociology that I was then reading. Mr. Miyagawa approved of them, and asked if I understood what religion was. As the old proverb goes, "the blind are not afraid of a snake," I answered very haughtily, using a term I had learned in a book on sociology, that the problem of the universe is solved by the concentrated will. Mr. Miyagawa said, "That is partly true, but is your emotion satisfied with it?" I could not reply to this. Then the minister said, "You who do not know anything about religion, must become a humble pupil, and study what religion is." It was

about the time when I was realizing the fact that, if I wished for the progress of women, I must not be looking for influence from outside, but start the progress myself. So immediately I began my lessons with him.

He started with the philosophy of religion, and twice a week I went to his home and listened to his lectures. After every lecture I reflected upon my proud past; it seemed foolish and shameful, and I was very repentant. After the twenty-fifth lecture, Mr. Miyagawa, seeing that I had begun to understand and was ready, opened the Bible to me for the first time.

## EFFORTS TO FIND THE WAY.

At first he took up the book of Matthew, and I studied the temptations in the wilderness, then the Sermon on the Mount, and through to the end. Having had my pride knocked down, it all sounded indeed like the Gospel from Heaven. Then he took up the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Romans. It must have been a great effort for Mr. Miyagawa to help me

who was so haughty and obstinate to understand the truth. Thinking of it now, I feel the deepest sense of gratitude to him. When he was explaining the Logos of John, he was perspiring in his effort.

I began going to church about this time. I did not enjoy it, for it seemed very rude of the preacher to call us, the congregation, "Sinners, sinners," when we had committed no crime, and it seemed hypocritical to hear prayers said in public. But one Sunday I heard Mr. Miyagawa's earnest prayer, when he was very much troubled in heart over the spiritual state of the time, saying, "Though I bear the sacred calling of preaching the Gospel, I am unable to uplift the souls who are falling. It is because I am not worthy of the calling, and I am ashamed before Thee. O, Almighty God, wilt Thou help me to accomplish this impossible task?" Every word of it came from the bottom of his heart, and I was touched. Though I did not yet know God, I felt that unless God was a real personality, such a prayer could not be said.

That summer I went to Karuizawa for the hot months, and in the bosom of quiet Nature I tried to enter into the real atmosphere of prayer. I labored hard morning and evening to pray, but when I closed my eyes, many worldly thoughts crowded my mind, and I could not pray. So, troubled with this state of my mind, I wrote Mr. Miyagawa, who kept constant vigilance, asking him how I could learn to pray. And in answer he wrote saying: "I think you hold yourself too stiff, as though you were putting yourself through the test of the *Zen* (a sect of Buddhism). Be like a child going to its father, free and trusting, and say to God what you have in your mind." But I had never experienced child-like trust. My father and mother, even my husband, depended on me all my life, so it did not seem fit that I should now go to God in a childlike manner. The summer passed away and the autumn came; soon another summer came around, and I was sixty-three years old. This summer the Young Women's Christian Association of Japan held its

summer conference at Kugenuma, and I was invited to talk to the girls in one of their meetings. I was old in years but very young in my Christian experience. I had only begun its alphabet, but I went, thinking that if ever I, an inexperienced Christian, could be made useful in His service, I would be so glad. Having served even a little, I was feeling the love of God increasing within me.

While I was at the conference, I met Col. Yamamuro (then Captain) of the Salvation Army. I admired his noble personality. He said to me, "I have heard that you have been studying the Bible with Mr. Miyagawa; how far do you understand it?" And I said: "I am having a very hard time in learning how to pray. Mr. Miyagawa told me to go to God like a child to its father. But I have never experienced a natural child life; I cannot do it." Then Col. Yamamuro said: "If that is the trouble, I will give you a book. Take it and the Bible and go to some quiet place. Don't argue, but just read and read, and pray and pray, and you will

have the real experience." And he gave me the book called "Helps to Holiness" by Col. Brengle.

### INSPIRATION.

According to Col. Yamamuro's advice, I took the two books and went to Karuizawa again for the summer. I was up early every morning, and spent my days in the mountains or deep in the woods, praying where no sound was heard but the songs of the birds. I read the books when at home, and lived a life quite apart from the world. At first, the moment I closed my eyes, all sorts of thoughts came crowding into my head and I could not even concentrate. But one morning in the midst of my effort to pray, a sense of perfectness came over me, and not a particle of impurity was left in me. Pure as a gem, I felt a direct contact with the absolute God. Tears poured forth and I did not know how to stop them. At the death of my parents and my husband never did I shed a tear, and at my own obstinacy I myself was surprised. But

that morning I was moved to tears by some thing. It was very strange. From that time on, I had a realization of the existence of God in the Universe, and it has never left me since. I opened my eyes. The morning mist had cleared away. The cooing of the wild pigeons and the song of the mountain nightingales sounded especially beautiful as though they were praising God, and the bright morning sun seemed to show forth the glory of God. Heaven and earth were full of the love of God, and my heart could not help but give thanks.

I went down the mountain and returned home. I repeated my daily lessons with the two books and knelt for the evening prayer and I had the same experience once more. From that day on, I enjoyed direct communion with God, such a great blessing it was! I realized that God's promise, "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you," is true.

Later my brother, who had been ill a long time, came up to his cottage in Karuizawa with a

professional "Go" * player, and I was invited to join them in the game. I like the game and I also wished to entertain my brother of whom I was very fond, so I joined them.

That day I tried to pray as usual, but much to my distress, confusion of thoughts disturbed me and I could not approach God. The harder I tried the less successful I was, and I prayed, "Forgive me if I have done any thing wrong." I prayed and prayed, but still I could not feel the inspiration that I had had upon the mountain.

The middle of September, when we began to feel the chill of the early autumn in the air, I left Karuizawa and went to the Mitsui's in Tokyo. Col. Yamamuro, being interested in the result of my summer studies, called on me there. I told him of my experience on the mountain: how each day I was able to come in contact with God in the ecstacy of prayer, how suddenly I lost the inspiration after I engaged in

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* "Go" is a Japanese game played on a checkered board with black and white stones.

a game of *Go*,* and how in vain I had searched to regain it. Col. Yamamuro said in a tone of reproof and admonition, "God never walks with a man who indulges himself in games of *Go*. Japanese would rather take the better than the best, and that is the reason why we do not produce great personalities." These words touched me as though they were a direct message from Heaven, and immediately I knelt down and was able to pray from my heart. And when I began to pray quietly with Col. Yamamuro and two or three friends who were present, tears came pouring down and I felt safe again in the loving arms of God. This is a great lesson that I shall not forget all my life. But I was not yet ready to receive baptism. It was not that I did not like to be baptised, but it was because I could not bear to give myself to God while yet unclean and inexperienced.

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* It was characteristic of Mme. Hirooka to carry to the extreme whatever she did. This game of *Go* requires mental effort, and she was skillful in it. Playing with the professional, she was doubtless stimulated into making the game a contest.

The night after I had the sense of being born anew with the help of Col. Yamamuro's sincere and frank advice, I was taken ill. I had a high fever with nephritis and I could not even stir. I spent a few months on the sick bed, and one time the doctor almost gave me up. But I did not take the disease as an affliction; I thought it was the time to put my old self upon the cross and gain a new life through Christ. And as I was enjoying a book of sermons by my minister and the biography of Gen. Booth, and coming into close touch with God in prayer, I began to take a turn for the better.

Just about that time, Mr. Miyagawa, who came up to Tokyo on a missionary tour, came to see me. He asked how I was progressing in my faith, and I told him my experiences. He thought I was ready for baptism and advised me to be baptised immediately upon my return to Osaka. He also gave me much general advice. And I listened to the words as coming from the Holy Will of God.

In December, when the doctor gave me permission to take a train journey, I decided to return to Osaka. It was because I planned to be baptised on Christmas day as a sign of my being born anew.

At the Osaka Church, every year at Christmas, they baptise young people only. And so that day nine out of ten of those who came for baptism were children of between thirteen and nineteen. I asked specially to be put with the children. At half past nine we entered the church and at ten o'clock the baptismal service began. At the end of the ceremony, Mr. Miyagawa prayed for the children and then he prayed especially for me. I remember his words: "Holy Father, this aged woman took upon herself all sorts of responsibilities at the time of the Restoration; and for her family and her country, she has continued her strife; and in her declining years she strove for the uplift of her own sex. But all these efforts have been on the material side. She realizes that her past efforts have been for naught, and now at the age of sixty, when

most people retire from activity, she has started to study Thy Way and has decided to give the remainder of her life to Thy service. We give thanks for the baptism she has now received. O Lord, give her grace to serve without wavering. We ask it in the name of Christ, Amen." The clear voice of the prayer filled the church, and I felt the indescribable sense of the presence of God. When the ceremony was over, the minister preached on "The Meaning of Prayer." The sermon touched me very deeply.

### DEATH OF MY BELOVED BROTHER.

Reborn Asa-ko* was conscious of her mission to serve the world and to spread the Gospel. Trusting her body and soul to God for the rest of her life, she was filled with peace and joy. After such an illness as I had, I needed a quiet rest, and the doctor still forbade me to go out, even to church. But I realized that it was an opportunity God gave me to prepare myself further for the work. If I had tried my active

* "Ko" is a suffix attached to the personal name of a female.

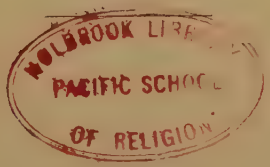
service with the usual impulsiveness immediately after I received baptism, I might have made many mistakes. So every day in my own room, I read the Bible and prayed earnestly.

In the meantime, I received the news from my beloved brother's family that his life was in danger. I was still in bed and I could not do anything then. So I prayed, trusting all to our Heavenly Father. In time, however, I was able to go up to Tokyo in spite of my ill health, and I was with him in his last moments and helped him to sleep in peace. I was able to attend to his business after his death without any trouble. All this was the gift of God, as I had trusted every thing to Him.

### LIFE OVERFLOWING WITH BLESSINGS.

After that I was determined that in work and in rest I would not be away from God. In former days only with the spirit of chivalry and patriotism I did kindness to my neighbors and dealt with the affairs of the world; but from those days on, everything—individual, family,

social—I wished to weigh and measure by the Will of God. I was determined that if it was God's Will, I would serve to the end and fight to the finish. And God does not regard even this old woman worthless. He keeps me so busy for the work of His Gospel that I have not days enough. I would get tired if they were worldly affairs, but the wonder of it is that in working for God alone, I feel the strength of new life and the grace of God increasing day by day. I realize the value of the reborn life. I give thanks for what I have gained and I pray without ceasing that the people of the world may leave the darkness and speedily reach the joy of walking with Jesus in the light, and that those who have already attained the joy may share it with their neighbors and co-operate to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.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## IN MEMORIAM.

Watching beside thine out-grown house of clay,
I know thou art not overcome of death:
Thy life was more than that expiring breath
That left the flesh! Thy Self hath gone away,
Leaving the night-bound tent, to seek the Day!
That eager, forward-reaching, prophet-mind
Cannot have ceased to be, like passing wind;
That spirit staunch, a snuffed-out candle-ray!
Ah no! e'en while I watch bereft, I feel
Thy presence near, yea nearer than of old;
Thou hast not really gone from us afar:
Still thou wilt share with us our woe and weal,
Still pray the Father lead us to His Fold;
Waiting to greet us where the blesséd are!

W. M. V.

Madam Hirooka died January 14, 1919.

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